



THE INTERNATIONAL BARENTS SECRETARIAT
ANNUAL REPORT 2020

The Barents Cooperation in 2020

In March 2020, all BEAC member states introduced restrictive measures to fight the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. All physical meetings scheduled in the Barents Cooperation were cancelled or postponed until further notice. The last physical conference on Barents Predators was held in Arkhangelsk on 5 March. The second wave of pandemic still is not allowing to plan physical meetings and the travel restrictions are expected to continue long during the next year jeopardizing among others the physical BEAC Ministerial meeting in Autumn 2021.

The Norwegian BEAC Chairmanship successfully hosted several Joint events on high level in cooperation with the BRC Chair Västerbotten. The first one – a roundtable attended by the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Governor of Västerbotten and high representatives from Finland and Russia - was held in Tromsø in January as a side event of the Arctic Frontiers conference.

A Joint Meeting on e-Health was held on 8 December as a follow-up session of the first Barents Ministerial Meeting on Health and Social issues hosted by Norway in November 2019. The Conference was organized in cooperation with the Steering Committee of the Barents Programme for New Technology and Methods in Health Care in sparsely populated areas. The main event of the Barents Cooperation in 2020 was the Joint High-Level Meeting, held digitally on 26 October.

The new financial mechanism was repeatedly addressed by the BRC in their Joint Statements and adding the decision-making about allocating project support on their Agenda may increase the engagement of the Governors in the BRC meetings. A special Task Force on Barents Financial Instrument convened several times to elaborate on the Rules and Procedures for this new funding mechanism for the Barents Cooperation.

Online meetings

The IBS started to test and use different online video conferencing platforms (Teams, GoToMeeting and Zoom). Weekly internal meetings were a successful solution to maintain the normal daily activities and communications inside the secretariat. Those platforms were also offered for the CSO, RC and Working Group online meetings. It was well received at all levels and most of the Working Groups switched smoothly to the new reality and continued their regular meetings virtually.



Regular online meetings were held among others within the CSO, RC, BFSN, WGEC, JWGT, JWGY, WGIP, JWGHS, JCRC, WGE and its sub-groups and some others. In addition, several thematic webinars were held both by the WGs (for example, Sustainable Nature Tourism on 25 November) and by the Kolarctic CBC funded projects, including Barents Region Transport project, implemented by the Regional WG on Transport and Logistics.

NB: All submitted Annual Reports are available on the website: <https://www.barentscooperation.org/en/Working-Groups/Annual-reports>

There were some problems with having BRYC meeting in August due to low attendance, but they managed to hold the Annual Meeting on 13 November and elect the new Board. The JWGC also managed to have a digital meeting on 3 December with the aim to update the Guidelines for the Barents Scholarship on Cultural Cooperation.

There were some technical problems with digital meetings of BEATA and JWGHS related to arranging simultaneous interpretation. The IBS recommends using its Zoom license in all WG meetings and webinars, as it is largely accepted in, for example, CSO and RC meetings. There were some security issues with this app in spring, but they were corrected later.

Zoom seems to be the best solution for the meetings and webinars, especially when simultaneous interpretation is needed. This platform has been successfully used by the WGE and its sub-groups in their meetings. The IBS is ready to provide all Working Groups with facilitating online meetings using Zoom, as we have purchased the license allowing simultaneous interpretation, if needed.

Zoom was also used for the BEAR versus Coronavirus session on 10 June, initiated by the Governor of Murmansk region. The second session was held on 14 October. Murmansk also hosted the 3rd international session “Cooperation in the Arctic” on 17 November, moderated by the Head of IBS. The first session on Covid-19 was well attended by most of the Barents Regional Council members on the Governor level. The thematic approach in the BRC meetings may be the solution in the future to have better attendance on the high-level.

The online meetings are now held on more regular basis and more frequently and even more effectively than many physical meetings, as they do not involve travelling time nor additional costs for the participants or the hosts (except for the license fees). The only problem with virtual meetings could arise from some technical problems when joining for the first time, but those may be solved by testing in advance. Also meeting different actors for the first time online may be an obstacle for having a smooth dialogue in the beginning.



The International Barents Secretariat (IBS)

The IBS team started to work remotely from home from 16 March. Some employees stayed in Kirkenes while some returned home (Head of IBS and Executive Officer). The IBS team came back to office in full capacity including the new Intern on 15 September.

During the year, the Head of IBS has participated and contributed with brief reports at the regular CSO, Regional Committee and the Sister Councils meetings. The IBS staff have also attended several seminars and webinars, meetings and conferences both physically (until March) and digitally. The Head of Secretariat moderated one high-level session on the Covid-19 pandemic in June and one on Cooperation in the Arctic in November.

The Environmental and Hot Spots Adviser has assisted the Ministerial Meeting on Environment in February and the Working Group of Environment meetings as well as facilitated the implementation of the numerous meetings within the Subgroups on Hot Spots Exclusion and Nature and Water Issues. The process of updating the Action plan on Climate Change has been kicked-off by the WGE Chair Finland in a joint digital meeting between the CSO and the WG Chairs.

The IBS has also participated in most of the Working Group meetings with few exemptions. In 2020 it has become a new task for the IBS to support both the National and the Regional Chairmanships and the Working Groups with providing technical support for their digital meetings.

During the year 2020 the Barents Cooperation website www.barentscooperation.org was visited by 18 982 users who viewed the pages 76 627 times during 30 571 sessions. The average time of the sessions was 2:51 minutes during which time the user visited 2,5 pages. 50 % of the users visited pages via organic search, 25 % directly and the rest were referral and from social media. In comparison to earlier years more new users were from the USA (10,22% of all sessions), while from Sweden 8,55%, from Finland 12,48%, from Norway 18,63% and from Russia 22,63% of all sessions.

The financial situation of the IBS is stable, and the accounts for 2020 are expected to show a surplus of NOK 530 000. The unusually high surplus is caused by reduced activity compared to the budget, and of course an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exact figures will be presented after the annual audit, but the IBS has already proposed to transfer NOK 400 000 of the unused 2020 funds to 2021 and add the remaining surplus to the working capital funds.



Staff of the IBS, Internships

The contract with **Roman Gokkoev** was prolonged for two years (until Summer 2022). Head of Secretariat **Tomas Hallberg's** contract ended in January 2021 after six years of his service with the IBS (since January 2015). The position as Head of IBS was widely announced in September 2020. The new Head of the IBS was selected among many strong candidates by the CSO in their online meeting on 5 November. The position was offered from January 2021 to **Markus Karlsen**, who previously worked as the Head of International Department at Finnmark Fylkeskommune in Norway. The contract with **Roy Hojem**, Accountant/Secretary, was prolonged for another three-year period (2019-2022). **Maria Dianova** returned from her maternity leave and continued to work as Climate, Environment and Hot Spot Advisor. During 2020 the IBS has had two Interns: **Johanna Partanen** (Finland), who's internship was interrupted due to Covid-19 in March, and **Ella Wahlbeck** (Finland) who served in Kirkenes during Autumn. There are plans to host IBS Intern Alumni Event in Kirkenes in 2021.

Synergy of the four Regional Sister Councils

It has been, since 2009, a custom to organize once a year a working level meeting aiming at improving cross-cutting coordination and reducing overlaps between the Four Councils in the North (AC, BEAC, CBSS and NCM). This year's annual meeting was held in Stockholm on 2 December. While the Head of IBS attended the meeting in person, the rest of the IBS staff took part in the meeting via video from the Kirkenes office.

Conclusions

Our experience is that some of the meetings online are sometimes better organized and more efficient. People more often get the chance to speak to the point when there is a regulated order for giving the word. But the outcome is mostly better when the virtual meetings are held between the people, who already know each other.

So far in the first half year of the pandemic it seems that the Working Groups, which were well-functioning before also continue to work well with online meetings. We have so far not noticed any new activity among the Working Groups, which had problems to meet before. Maybe there is a mode of "wait and see".



A positive thing is that, since the IBS offers now to host the virtual meetings for both Chairmanships and the Working Groups on platforms that we have purchased, we also automatically are in the loop of what is happening at a very low cost.

We think that this time of travel and meeting restrictions also gives more time for reflection and planning. How do we organize our meetings structure in the future? When we all are well-connected and highly functional in the online meetings, maybe there is less need for physical meetings. Could one of the Regional Council meetings per year be a virtual one? Could a virtual meeting on the state secretary level every second year be added to the biennial Ministerial meeting?

When the Regional Committee and the CSO meet virtually, it is easy to invite Chairpersons from the Working Groups to give a brief report. This could be done in a much more frequent way than when we have only physical meetings. The feedback will come faster and the reaction on what works and what does not. Also, whether any Working Group needs any extra support.

Hoping for the best and planning for the worst. The IBS thinks that we have some learnings, which we could bring with us when the Covid-19 pandemic is history. The Barents Cooperation is about cross-border cooperation. We have now a lot of time to plan for the future, the projects for our youth, indigenous peoples, transport and tourism and all other things, which connect the people in the Barents region.

Kirkenes, 13 January 2021

Tomas Hallberg
Head of IBS



Meetings and events in 2020:

Meetings of the CSO

14-15 January 2020 in Oslo (face-to-face)

Online, 12 May 2020

Online, 17 June 2020

Online, 22 September 2020

Online, 5 November 2020

Online, 9 December 2020

Meetings of the Regional Committee

28 January 2020 in Tromsø (face-to-face)

Online, 9 June 2020

Online, 29 September 2020

Online, 15 December 2020

Meetings of the Barents Regional Council (thematic conferences)

The 1st BEAR vs. Coronavirus webinar 10 June 2020

The 2nd BEAR vs. Coronavirus webinar 14 October 2020

WGIP

26 January 2020 in Tromsø (face-to-face)

Online, 15 June 2020

Online, 11-12 November 2020

JCRC

Online, 29 April 2020

Online, 10 December 2020

WGEC

Online, 10 June 2020

BFSN

Online, 1 April 2020

Online, 18 August 2020

Online, 16 December 2020

WGE

BEAC 14th Ministerial Meeting on Environment in Luleå 4-5 February 2020

Several subgroup online meetings during the year

Online, 5 June 2020



Online, 7-8 October 2020

Webinar on Sustainable Nature Tourism 25 November 2020

BEATA

Webinar on Safe and Smart Roads, 29 October 2020

Steering Committee Meeting, 30 October 2020 (online)

RWGTL

Several webinars by Kolarctic CBC project, March 2020

Online, 16 December 2020

JWGHS

Online, 10 June 2020

Online, 19 November 2020

JWGC

Online, 3 December 2020

JWGT

Online, 18 June 2020

JWGY

16 January 2020 in Tromsø (face-to-face)

Online, 15 June 2020

Other events

- The Barents cooperation - a success story for international collaboration in the Arctic, Roundtable hosted by the BEAC and the BRC Chairs in Tromsø 27 January 2020
- The force of youth in building tomorrow's Arctic, Workshop as a part of Arctic Frontiers in cooperation with the BEAC Chairmanship and the BRYC in Tromsø 29 January 2020
- Migration of Predators near Populated Areas in the Barents Region, Seminar in Arkhangelsk 5 March 2020

- Baltic Meets Arctic Workshop 30 September 2020 (online)
- Joint Barents High-Level Meeting 26 October 2020 (online)
- BRYC Annual Event 13 November 2020 (online)
- International Session Cooperation in the Arctic 17 November 2020 (online)
- Four Council in the North Meeting in Stockholm 2 December 2020 (hybrid)
- Joint Meeting on e-Health 8 December 2020 (online)